DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 095 554 CS 201 503

AUTHOR Ward, Jean W.
TITLE Attacking the King's English: Implications for Journalism Arising from Feminist Critiques of Public Language.
PUB DATE Aug 74
NOTE 14p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Association for Education in Journalism (57th, San Diego, California, August 18-21, 1974)

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.75 HC-$1.50 PLUS POSTAGE
DESCRIPTORS College Instruction; Communications; Females; Feminism; *Journalism; *Language; Language Role; *Linguistics; Public Opinion; *Sex Discrimination; Sex Stereotypes; Social Change

ABSTRACT

Feminist resentment of journalistic language use can be found in published letters to the editor, in feminist periodicals, and in public address. This paper examines commentary on language, noting the charge that journalistic language frequently is discriminatory and offensive to women in defining them, in designating their identity, and in revealing the assumption that "all people are male unless proven female." The implications for journalism practice and research which arise from feminist language critiques include: (1) the need in journalism to consider linguistic perspectives, (2) the possibility that language change will be accomplished deliberately, (3) the consideration of journalistic language from the viewpoints of language both as director and as reflector of social change, (4) the possibility that journalistic language use produces covert signals which reduce potential audiences and inhibit opinion formation, and (5) the challenge which faces journalism educators in teaching women students and in preparing all students to understand relationships between social change and language change and the mediating role played by journalism in public dialogue. (Author)

ED 095554

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH, EDUCATION & WELFARE
NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION
THIS DOCUMENT HAS BEEN REPRODUCED EXACTLY AS RECEIVED FROM THE PERSON OR ORGANIZATION ORIGINATING IT. POINTS OF VIEW OR OPINIONS STATED DO NOT NECESSARILY REPRESENT OFFICIAL NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION POSITION OR POLICY

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

ATTACKING THE KING'S ENGLISH: IMPLICATIONS FOR JOURNALISM ARISING FROM FEMINIST CRITIQUES OF PUBLIC LANGUAGE

Jean W. Ward, Ph.D.

University of Minnesota

Mass Communications and Society Division

Association for Education in Journalism

San Diego, California

August 19, 1974

CS 201 503

ATTACKING THE KING'S ENGLISH: IMPLICATIONS FOR JOURNALISM ARISING FROM FEMINIST CRITIQUES OF PUBLIC LANGUAGE

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

> Sir/ In your article on Professor Jaworski (March 13) you state: "Their son Joe is a lawyer in Houston; their daughters Joanie and Claire are both married." Sometime it would be refreshing to see a statement like "What does she do? She sculpts and reads Dostoevsky. Her brother is married."

> (To the editor)
> My wife won a "beautiful activist" award last week. In every piece of publicity concerning the event she was listed using my name. Since I am never introduced as Mr. Mary Ellen Grika, I resent my wife being introduced as Mrs. Herb Grika.

Increasingly, published letters to the editor in newspapers and magazines are reflecting feminist anger at journalistic uses of the English language. Clearly, without intending to do so, journalists increasingly are violating an old rule: Never offend an audience unintentionally. The letters above, the first to Time and the second to The Minneapolis Tribune, represent two forms of language use which have been found offensive. The first represents a category in which language reveals, however unintentionally, the editor's assumptions about the world, i.e., that men derive identity from their occupations and that women acquire identity through their marital arrangements. The second letter is highly atypical in one way---it is written by a man on behalf of a feminist idea---but typical in another, in that it deals with identity from the perspective of the stylebook, i.e., requirements that a married woman be known by her husband's name.

To date, major criticism of the mass media by feminists has centered around entertainment and advertising, particularly in the area of prescription

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

of values and creation of stereotypes. Other points of concentration have been discrimination in employment and coverage (or blackout) of women's movement news. The use of language has not been a focal point of feminist criticism of the mass media in any way comparable to similar criticism leveled at public education. To date we have not seen content analysis studies of newspapers, news magazines and radio and TV news programs which parallel the examinations of public school textbooks and which demonstrate the extent to which discriminatory language routinely is employed in the textbook publishing industry.

Feminist commentary on journalistic language practices has not been collected nor examined. This commentary is found in letters to the editor, in asides in public address and in feminist writings both in the popular press and in the 300 feminist periodicals now in circulation.[1] Much of the comment is auxiliary to work which analyzes sexism inherent in the English language, as distinguished from sexist language use which is optional with the user or sexist assumptions which are inadvertently revealed through language use. The appearance in February, 1974, of a 56-page annotated bibliography, Sex Differences in Language, Speech and Nonverbal Communication[2] suggests to some extent the scholarly commitment already present in this area of study. The 17 entries under "Sexist Bias in the English Language" do not deal specifically with language use in the mass media, but the journalist reading these articles could be expected to readily appreciate the implications of this scholarship for journalism.

A full examination of the feminist commentary on journalistic language is beyond the scope of this paper, which will deal mainly with two frequently-made charges by feminists:

1. Journalistic language frequently is discriminatory and offensive to women, particularly in defining women and designating identity.

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

2. Journalistic messages, closely examined, demonstrate that too often editors and writers look on the female sex as an abnormal one, that the normal human condition is male.

Editors who suppose they can deal with the question of female identity by capitulating to the demand for "Ms." as a replacement for "Miss" or "Mrs." have failed to appreciate the significance of feminist objections to media-prescribed identity and to discriminatory designations.

Identity deals with who one is; central to identity is name. The present controversy over the name by which a person is known is hardly a new one. The millions brought to slavery and born into slavery in the United States suffered many identity threats, including frequent and arbitrary name changes. Feminists are trying to tell editors that there <u>is</u> something in a name as they challenge the old rule that the most important fact about a woman is her marital status. In refusing to allow the "Ms." designation, one editor explained, "First, the Ms. form is meaningless. It does not properly identify the individual. You have no idea whether the woman is single, married, widowed or divorced..."[3] Nevertheless, Jane Jones is beginning to insist that editors have no right to convert her against her will to Mrs. Henry Jones or Mrs. Jane Jones. She doesn't even want to be, in first reference, "Ms." Jane Jones. "Ms." designations should be reserved for second reference.[4] But the major point, which some editors appear to have missed, is a challenge to the notion that editors have a right to tell people what their identity is.

As to designation---a term employed here to suggest a journalistically-chosen designation relative to one's position, role or significance---journalists are charged with employing language in a discriminatory fashion. Editors who wouldn't contemplate designating a Black male adult as "boy,"

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

continue to refer to adult women as "girls" or "gals." For instance, two 28-year-old women sentenced to life imprisonment in Turkey after conviction for smuggling hashish, are repeatedly designated as "girls" in headlines and text. In a TV news program on car pooling, the videotape shows women employees who appear to be in their 40s or 50s getting into a car together, with accompanying narration, "These Control Data girls...." A similar videotape which has men involved has accompanying narration designating them as "employees."

"Housewife" as a designation for married women has come under attack as a meaningless designation in most places where it is used as an identifying term. "The housewife at the supermarket" erroneously suggests that "housewife" and "consumer" are synonymous. Lists of committee appointees and jurors often designate all married women as "housewives," while single women and both married and single men are listed by occupation. An unemployed man might be designated as "retired banker" or "civic leader" or even "activist" but "housewife" is an all-purpose journalistic designation for married women. Similarly, a person requesting an abortion is designated—in law as well as news reporting--as "the mother," without any evidence that she is, in fact, a mother.

Another journalistic practice offensive to feminists is the custom of identifying a person with the title or position held by either her husband or her father. Thus, when Norma Olson is appointed to the Planning Commission, she is continually identified as "the wife of a zoology professor" rather than as a civic leader. To illustrate how the practice is offensive to feminists, notice the designations applied to two possible school board candidates mentioned in a news story: one is called an attorney and a former Rhodes scholar, while the other one is referred to as "the widow of

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

a Henry High School teacher." In this case, one person, the male candidate, is designated by the most prestigious titles available, however marginal their relevance to school board affairs, while the other person, a woman, is described by the least impressive designation, in spite of the fact that she is a leader in organizations serving young people and is a trustee of one of her city's largest churches.

Standard language practice makes it easy to suggest that women (and children, for that matter) exist primarily as the possessions of men. News stories may read: "He has a wife and six children" or "He is married and has six children" or "Jones is married. Four of his six children live at home," suggesting various ways in which men own the family. Some stories even suggest luggage-like qualities, as in "He moved the family from Fort Worth to Indianapolis."

On the question of separate designations for vocations and professions, feminists view them as techniques for disparaging women. "Such terms as author, aviator, heir, laundry worker, sculptor, singer, poet, Jew, and Negro are neuter terms which are without exception properly applicable to both females and males....Terms ending in 'feminine' suffixes imply that females are a special and unequal form of the correct neuter expression."[5] The same objections apply to lady doctor, woman professor and other similar terms.

To turn from matters of identity and designation to a second category, the way in which language reveals assumptions about the world, is to move to the more subtle but far-reaching aspect of journalistic use of the language. At the outset, it is important to reiterate Jessica Murray's point that "the language we use, like everything else that reflects our culture, is based on the archetypal assumption that human means male." As the assumption works out, "All people are male until proven female."[6] But quite apart from the male bias inherent in the language is the question of journalistic language

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

use which suggests that the notion also resides in the minds of writers and editors that maleness is normal and femaleness is abnormal or at least exceptional. Such covert messages have been identified by some feminists as "the invisibility problem" and "the freak problem."

As to invisibility, it resembles the identity problem in that it is a longstanding problem and not one peculiar to women's status. Journalists have heard similar observations from Blacks and Indian Americans and from the poor who have claimed they were defined out of existence. And a few history texts record the observations on invisibility of Abigail Adams, Mary Wollstonecraft, Margaret Fuller, and Sojourner Truth, among others.

What---apart from the utter invisibility of 51 percent of the population---could lead a respected writer and a sharp copy desk on a metropolitan newspaper to publish a section-page interpretive story on the woes of middle age with this lead: "Middle age is a time when girls in mini-skirts begin to call you 'sir'"? The remainder of the long story devotes one paragraph to women, noting that in middle age they begin to worry about their powers to attract men.

Similarly, these headlines are revealing:

(Head) Should You Make Your Wife Executrix?
(Subhead) It May Be the Worst Business Decision an Executive Can Make

(Head) Wife Can Enjoy Fishing Trip, Too

(Head) Lebedoff, 2 Women Named to Judgeships

Another indicator of invisibility is ignoring of achievements by women and focusing on men and their achievements or failures. A notable example followed the Winter Olympic Games in Japan, which found sportscasters bemoaning the disgraceful showing of the American Alpine skiers. The complaints could have meaning only if one assumed that medals won by

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

women skiers don't count, for the women made a good showing.

A more complex example of feminist resentment of invisibility has to do with the treatment of women as sex objects, both in photos and in news copy. Beyond resentment of the stereotyping, there is an additional irritation that writers and editors are telegraphing a clear message: our audience is male. Thus, when The New York Times reported on possible Supreme Court nominees, one woman was mentioned prominently. In discussing her general qualifications for the office, and her background, the "Times" remarked also on her "bathing beauty figure." Since that is an exclusively male way of reacting to a person, women readers are expected to know that what counts here is how males in the audience react.[7] (In public speaking, women have some amusing ways of getting revenge and can count on getting a laugh by reversing the situation; contemporary male centerfolds in some women's magazines and on calendar art probably are related to female resentment of their invisibility to editors.)

Concerning "the freak problem," Casey Miller and Kate Swift have pointed out,

> Some long-standing conventions of the news media add insult to injury. When a woman or girl makes news, her sex is identified at the beginning of the story, if possible in the headline or its equivalent. The assumption, apparently, is that whatever event or action is being reported, a woman's involvement is less common and therefore more newsworthy than a man's. If the story is about achievement, the implication is: "pretty good for a woman." And because people are assumed to be male unless otherwise identified, the media have developed a special and extensive vocabulary to avoid the constant repetition of "woman." The results, "Grandmother Wins Nobel Prize," "Blonde Hijacks Airliner," "Housewife to Run for Congress," convey the kind of information that would be ludicrous in comparable headlines if the subjects were men. Why, if "Unsalaried Husband to Run for Congress" is unacceptable to editors, do women have to keep explaining that to describe them through external or superficial concerns reflects a sexist view of women as decorative objects, breeding machines and extensions of men, not real people?[8]

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

In a similar vein, Pamela Howard cites this New York Post account of a scientific expedition by aquanauts: "Five women who lived two weeks on the bottom of the sea have increased the odds that lipstick and powder-puffs one day will be standard equipment aboard spaceships."[9]

The most broadly-based challenges to current language practices have dealt with language which is optional with the user. But some proposals acknowledge that the existing structure provides no satisfactory way out of a dominantly-male perspective. Miller and Swift propose genkind to replace mankind.[10] They acknowledge noticeable changes, such as replacing his with his/her or himself with him/herself, but claim that such solutions lack grace and felicity. They propose a singular personal pronoun that does not designate gender and suggest that common usage of they (Everyone ate their ice cream) may provide a clue to an acceptable solution. Accordingly, they suggest:

THE HUMAN PRONOUN[11]

	Singular		Plural
	Distinct Gender	Common Gender	Common Gender
Nominative	*he* and *she*	*tey*	*they*
Possessive	*his* and *her* (or *hers*)	*ter* (or *ters*)	*their* (or *theirs*)
Objective	*him* and *her*	*tem*	*them*

Obviously, the implications of the feminist challenge go beyond the surface of the objections cited. Some implications for journalism are suggested below, along with recommendations for further study.

1. As it faces demands for language change in a number of areas, journalism lacks a cogent, articulated position on language. There are frequent exhortations to "use good English" or to "preserve the King's English," both of which are relatively meaningless guidelines seeming to

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

argue against language change. Linguists rarely address the question of language use in the media, since they usually work with oral messages in the interpersonal context. There is a need for scholars in journalism and linguistics to consider one another's perspectives on language in the search for a common view of the relationships of public language to public policy.

2. In proposing language changes which will avoid structuring the world in male-dominated terms, feminists have gone a significant distance toward advocating language planning which would modify the language. The term language planning is familiar mostly in the context of the so-called "new" nations or nations newly freed from colonial rule, in situations requiring the adoption of official languages and the assurance of cooperation of major institutions in the use of the adopted languages. But perhaps the same general proposition is in the making currently in the United States, with feminists acting currently in the role of would-be adopters and enforcers of non-sexist language in an effort to speed human liberation.

To date, the bulk of the "enforcement" efforts have been directed toward public education, as the voluminous literature on linguistic sexism vis a vis public school texts and curriculum easily demonstrates.[12] Language used by journalists has not been examined in any remotely comparable way. Scholars might profitably be alert to the possibilities for content analysis turning on current language use and on changes in language practice. Further, the impact of expected language changes in public education might appropriately be identified and measured.

3. Much, perhaps most, of the feminist criticism of language used in schools and media, accepts---probably unknowingly---the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis which, reduced to simple terms, states that language has the power to hold the mind in captivity, predetermining through its lexicon

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

and its structure, certain key social and cultural outlooks. The proposition that society will change when language allows it to do so suggests that these feminists will expect major "public" users of English, such as schools and media, to act positively on behalf of the desired language changes.

But an alternate view, that language, both in lexicon and structure, reflects and confirms existing social and cultural viewpoints, sometimes is suggested. The latter is Lakoff's concluding point in "Language and Woman's place:"

> ...the social discrepancy in the positions of men and women in our society is reflected in linguistic disparities. The linguist, through linguistic analysis, can help to pinpoint where these disparities lie, and can suggest ways of telling when improvements have been made. But it should be recognized that social change creates language change, not the reverse; or at best, language change influences changes in attitudes slowly and indirectly, and these changes in attitudes will not be reflected in social change unless society is receptive already.[13]

Assuming, as linguists today likely would, that Lakoff's position is the more defensible of the two is not to find that the argument lacks significance for journalism. Journalists remain responsible for the style-books they write and for the stories and headlines which they produce which adhere to the style requirements. Journalistic language is more deliberately used language than is the oral, everyday language which forms the basis for most linguistic analysis. If social change produces language change, it must be recognized that some language users in society have more power, through their highly amplified voices, than do other language users in shaping the ever-changing language. It is hardly inconceivable that journalistic writing and speaking constitutes some sort of public model.

4. Typical readership studies and public opinion polls show that female members of the audience attend less to "hard" news than do male audience

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

members and that significantly more females than males answer "no opinion" to pollsters. What is the relationship between these findings and the rule that "all people are male until proven female?" How many covert signals tell readers, "This story is for men"? The language of the pollsters also needs to be examined. Since 1945 the American Institute of Public Opinion has been asking periodically, "If you had a son, would you like to see him go into politics as a life's work?" despite the fact that women have been "going into politics" since long before Gallup began his questioning.

5. The implications for journalism education touch upon all of the foregoing conclusions. Rush's paper reports on the demoralization of women students using sexist journalism texts and their conclusion that text writers and faculty assigning texts ought to view the texts in the light of professional standards of accuracy and credibility. Such a re-examination of bias inherent in journalistic language use may result in a program of studies designed to eradicate ignorance of relationships between language and society. Such studies might be the beginning of interdisciplinary scholarship involving sociolinguistics and mass communication.

If feminist challenges to language discrimination have significant impact---and the signs are that in public education the challenges <u>are</u> having such impact---journalism will be faced with a need to accommodate fairly rapid changes prescribed essentially for the broad purpose of changing the political relationships between females and males. How well prepared journalists will be to deal with the implications will depend upon the training they get as undergraduates. The profession will respond more intelligently if its members understand the relationship of social change to language change and the role journalists play as among the most conspicuous voices in public discourse.

//

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

Footnotes

1 Sue Galloway, "The New Feminism: Its Periodicals," Wilson Library Bulletin, 47:150, October, 1972.

2 Barrie Thorne and Nancy Henley, Sex Differences in Language, Speech and Nonverbal Communication (Photocopied matter, University of Pennsylvania, 1974).

3. John Finnegan, executive editor, St. Paul Dispatch and Pioneer Press, quoted in Catherine Watson and Margaret Zack, "My-tifying the Media," Twin Cities Journalism Review, 2:18, January-February, 1974.

4 There is some evidence that "Ms." may be a short-lived term in media use; it may be dropped after it becomes plain that a sex indicator in second reference is as inappropriate as a marital status indicator. A growing number of publications, both national and local, use first and second names, untitled, for first reference and last name alone for the second reference. Network news style, however, has not followed this pattern to date.

5 Elizabeth Burr, Susan Dunn, and Norma Farquhar, "Women and the Language of Inequality," Social Education, 36:854, December, 1972.

6 Jessica Murray, "Male Perspective in Language," Women: A Journal of Liberation, 3:46, 1973.

7 Robin Lakoff, "Language and Woman's Place," Language and Society, 2:65, April,1973.

8 Casey Miller and Kate Swift, "One Small Step for Genkind," The New York Times Magazine, April 16, 1972, p. 100.

9 Pamela Howard, "Watch Your Language, Men," (More), February, 1972, p. 3.

10 Miller and Swift, p. 102.

11 Miller and Swift, "De-Sexing the Language," Current, March, 1972, pp. 44-45.

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

12 For example, see Carol Ahlum and Jacqueline M. Fralley, Feminist Resources for Schools and Colleges, A Guide to Curricular Materials (Old Westbury, N.Y., The Feminist Press, 1973); "Guidelines for Improving the Image of Women in Textbooks," a pamphlet prepared by the Sexism in Textbooks Committee of Women at Scott, Foresman and issued by the publisher in 1972; Ramona R. Rush, Ph.D., "Sexism in Journalism Education and Journalism Texts," a paper presented at the 1973 meeting of the Association for Education in Journalism.

13 Lakoff, p. 76.

14 Rush, p. 9.